

Waging Peace

“You are the kind fire who does not cease to burn, consuming us with flames of love and peace, driving us out like sparks to set the world on fire”. 'Song to the Holy Spirit', James K. Baxter

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Last week the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia came out strongly against the treatment of those caught up in the police raids in Ruatoki. It has also expressed disquiet recently about some aspects of the current Immigration Bill. These are both encouraging signs of our commitment to social justice. But they, like other such initiatives, often seem to lack a coherent theological justification, that is beyond those of secular advocates. In the story and symbol which marks the Church's liturgical year, Advent is the time for taking stock, for being stirred up and confronted with who and why we are, as Christians and as human beings. So it would seem an occasion to look for such coherence.

The fundamental good news of the Gospel account as the New Testament portrays it centres on one major theme, the peace and love of God. In the story of the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus - the Jesus event and experience - in the presentation of what God is like and in the nature of the Kingdom of God, this message and witness is clear, pervasive and unequivocal. It underlies much of Jesus' teaching and action, a discipleship call, by direct exhortation to be peacemakers, to resist violence actively but not violently, to not retaliate, to work for reconciliation, to overcome evil with good, to love enemies; by story and action, to love neighbours, even when different or foreigners, to accept and absorb hostility, to work for justice and healing imaginatively without the use of force. It is central to the portrayal of Jesus as the suffering servant, and to the call to imitative discipleship. It explains the Cross as the inevitable result of the reaction of the powers of this world to Jesus' life and teaching, the resurrection as the triumph of love and peace over the forces of violence, and it reveals the essential nature of God.

Yet, if you were to ask anyone, including many Christians, what is the central message of Christianity, I doubt this would be the answer you would get.

Why then has the Church in general been so anxious to explain away and water down this central message, in doctrine and action, as impossible, irresponsible, incredible, unbiblical, mistaken?

Examples of such dismissal and distortion are many, in doctrine and action, much of it now happily historical but much of it still accepted - or not challenged - wisdom in our liturgy and teaching. We may not now endorse apartheid or genocide or honour killing, but our teaching on war and peace and violence and resistance is still unclear at best. We may not advocate the killing of those who are different, Jews, Muslims, gays, but we are still unreliable about the place of women, children, gays and lesbians, those with disabilities, refugees, those of other faiths. We may have some misgivings about the death penalty, but our legal "justice" measures still owe more to punishment than mercy. We may have abandoned mission by the sword, but we often seem to be unclear what the message is that we are proclaiming. And much of this can be traced to unacknowledged understandings of the violence present in much doctrinal thinking and teaching: about atonement, about repentance, about sin, and, ultimately, about the nature of God as revealed in the Jesus event.

It is of course easy to explain much of this, especially historically, as the Gospel interpreted and filtered through the cultural, imperial, juridical, lenses of the times, especially in the long years of Christendom. And often indeed in all those times there has been Christian peace witness, both individual and collective, which can be seen as enlightened by the standards of its own time. But on

the whole it would be not inaccurate to say that if the primary calling of the church is to be a peace community, a sign of the Kingdom of God, it has been “massively faithless” (Hays).

But here in the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia in the 21st century we have a chance to step away and forward from our earlier connections, in fact if not in law, with the “establishment”, be it cultural, colonial, imperial, patriarchal or ecclesial, an Advent chance to take stock.

So, do we really conceive of God as violent, vengeful, retributive, defending his (almost certainly “his”) honour, when the best of humankind can be seen to react differently? Do we think that God is such as to demand and arrange the death of his son? That such violence, or any violence, is redemptive? That wars are ever “just” or justified, even as a “last resort”? That there is no such thing as structural violence, that is, that sin and salvation are purely personal matters? Do we really still imagine that the unity of the church can be bought by ignoring the violence perpetrated against groups of its members (the question currently obsessing the Anglican Communion)? How do we really envisage the relationship between peace, justice, love and mercy? Between Christians and the State? How do we think evil should be resisted?

Of course these questions are all framed provocatively and are advancing a particular theology, and intentionally so. For that is the point. These are the questions central to our faith and community which need to be laid bare and debated openly in the wider church as they have been throughout Christian history in the academy.

Let us then consider some issues facing us in Aotearoa New Zealand today which have some connection to the promotion of peace and the negation of violence. There are global questions about a possible “responsibility to protect”, around the use of nuclear weapons and cluster bombs, about the negative effects of globalization and global inequities and corporate responsibilities. There are questions of human equality, as in race relations or immigration policy, of human rights in the effects of the “war on terror” here and in our treatment of prisoners. What should we do about levels of abuse against women and children in particular? What is our rationale for arming the police, other than that others do it? All of these are connected, or can be connected, with violence in one form or another.

This is not to say that the church in general, or the Anglican Church in Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia, has never spoken out or taken a position on any of these issues. Throughout its history there have been those in the church who, in their own contexts and understandings, have tried to bring a biblical peace witness to bear on all these matters. Here only last week, as I have said, the Anglican Church spoke out against the treatment of those caught up in the police raids in Ruatoki. We are also fortunate to have access to other strong traditions of peace witness, both Mori and Maori, which can leave us in no doubt as to how costly such stands can be. But I do not believe that we have a coherent message as to what grounds our stance theologically in all these cases. We are in danger, as one writer has said, of “piecemeal(ing) peace away” (Swartley).

Peace-builders are generally accused of two things: being unrealistic, and being “passive” that is not reacting, or taking an easy option. Of course this way is “unrealistic”, and indeed revolutionary, what else would we expect? We are not doing very well as we are. The charge of taking no action and especially no risks, (unfortunately associated with the word “pacifist”) can be refuted by a look at some practitioners of non-violence and the price they have paid, from Jesus himself to Francis of Assisi, Gandhi, conscientious objectors, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu.

The Church, including the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia, is called always to two things, with hopefully some connection between them, a grounding belief and action in the world. If we believe in God's peace, a peace which encompasses both love and justice, we must train for it and model it and work for it, within our own church and local communities, within the wider Anglican Communion, and even in national and global contexts, not just as individual Christians, not just as particular parishes or fringe "peace groups", but as a church community, acting and speaking together, not only in opposing what we are against, but in practical suggestions for different kinds of action, different dedicated and often costly solutions.

To take the gospel of peacemaking seriously we need to practice. Such a way of looking and working is as revolutionary now as it was in Jesus' time, as counter-cultural and counter-intuitive. This is not how human beings are wired to behave. But this is what the Jesus event broke in to show us. As is clear from Jesus' own story, it is too late when conflict is close, whatever sort of conflict, and the crisis of decision comes, when the press statement is due or the envoy must be sent or the unexpected, imaginative, or indeed sacrificial response is required, to work out a theory and a strategy. Training and preparation, in conflict resolution, in new ways of approaching old dilemmas, are needed. For these there is plenty of help out there: take for example, the Dublin Action Agenda on the Prevention of Violent Conflict of 2004, which as well as encouraging alternative strategies, concludes:

"Historically, the emphasis has been on strengthening the institutional capacity for military response. The emphasis now needs to be on strengthening the institutional capacity for non-violent civilian response. ...Efforts to generate a sustainable culture of peace must be rooted deeply in the population...Education for peace is a fundamental element of this transformation."

What the Church has to offer in addition is a reason, a stunning reason, for acting in this way.

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References

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Dublin Action Agenda on the Prevention of Armed Conflict, Regional meeting (April 2004) of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict.

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